MESSAGE:

In recent times, trade interests have proven to be the cornerstone of the EU's external and internal actions. Commitment and tireless leadership to uphold the EU's fundamental values have proven to be nothing but delays and empty words. Therefore, as of July 2025, IFUD of Human Rights has revoked the European Commission's, and thus the EU's, license to represent human rights. Human rights serve solely as a political instrument and are applied selectively. This benefits none of the EU's citizens and costs them unnecessary money.

Sustainable development and humanitarian aid. Security and human rights. They are more important than ever. And they will continue to be the linchpin of our external action. This will need a lot of work and tireless leadership.

Ursula von der Leyen
President of the European Commission

Speech in the European Parliament Plenary Session
on the new College of Commissioners and its programme

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"Check against delivery"

President Metsola,

Honourable Members,

Before I present to you my new team, I would like to start by thanking the outgoing College. Five years ago, no one could have imagined what Europe would go through. And I could not have imagined a team as dedicated and tireless to go through that with. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your service to Europe.

Honourable Members,

When I stood here exactly five years ago, asking for your confidence, I spoke of the events of 1989. About the generation that returned freedom and democracy to the people of Europe. The courage of everyday people, like those in Bratislava or Timișoara, who stood up for their liberty. The leaders like Lech Wałęsa and Václav Havel who inspired entire countries and helped reunite an entire continent. I think back to the power in those images of 2 million people holding hands across the Baltics. Or those tasting freedom for the first time on the border between Hungary and Austria. So it was with great emotion that I witnessed the moving events in Prague just ten days ago. Not just the people honouring and celebrating 35 years since the Velvet Revolution. But also those mourners who gathered across town outside the Hlávka student dormitory. A place which symbolises what happened on that exact same

day 85 years ago. The day Nazi troops murdered students, closed universities and curbed civil liberties.

I start with this because these stories incarnate Europe's eternal struggle and sacrifice for freedom and democracy. Because fighting for freedom connects us as Europeans. Our past and our present. Our nations and our generations. For me, this is the raison d'être of our Union and it remains its driving force more than ever today. This is the Europe that I love. And this is the Europe my Commission will always devote itself to. Because I believe that our generation of Europeans must once again fight for freedom and sovereignty. For the freedom that the people of Ukraine are heroically fighting for. For the freedom to shape our own future in a confrontational and unstable world. But this freedom is not just an abstract word. It is about Europeans knowing that their families will be safe. Their country protected. That they will be able to afford to buy food or heat their homes, with decent wages and fair prices. That they will be able to seize opportunities. And that they feel in control of the change – and the speed of change happening – in society. Our fight for freedom may look different to generations past. But the stakes are just as high. And, honourable Members, these freedoms will not come for free. It will mean making difficult choices. It will mean massive investment in our security and prosperity. And above all it will mean staying united and true to our values. Finding ways to work with each other – and overcoming fragmentation. This is what I – and all 26 women and men with me – will strive for every single day. We are ready to get to work immediately.

Honourable Members,

In the last weeks, you have scrutinised every Member of this College. You have tested their fitness for the jobs they will serve. I know this was not easy. But overcoming divisions and forging compromises is the hallmark of any vivid democracy. And my message today is that we want to work with you in that spirit. We will be guided by the Political Guidelines this House voted on and by the mission letters, in which I will address concerns that you have raised in the hearings. And as I said before the vote in July, we will work with all democratic pro-European forces in this House. And as I have done in my first mandate, I will always work from the centre. Because we all want the best for Europe – and the best for Europeans. So now is the time to come together.

Honourable Members,

This unity will be all the more important in today's contested world. A world in which every weakness is weaponised, every division pounced upon and every dependency exploited. Our freedom and sovereignty depend more than ever on our economic strength. Our security depends on our ability to compete, innovate and produce. And our social model depends on a growing economy while facing demographic change. This is why I asked Mario Draghi to chart the way forward. His diagnosis was stark and his roadmap for action equally ambitious. Many of his proposals were taken up in the mission letters. Leaders endorsed his work in the

European Council earlier this month. And I have listened carefully to the hearings. I have heard your repeated calls to deliver the substantial change he is putting forward, with speed and with ambition. So I can announce that the first major initiative of the new Commission will be a Competitiveness Compass. This will frame our work for the rest of the term. The Compass will be built on the three pillars of the Draghi report. The first is closing the innovation gap with the US and China. The second is a joint plan for decarbonisation and competitiveness. And the third is increasing security and reducing dependencies.

Honourable Members,

The first pillar is closing the innovation gap. Let me start with the good news. Europe's global share of patent applications is on par with the US and China. But only one-third of these are commercially exploited. We are roughly as good as the US at creating start-ups. But when it comes to scale-ups, we are doing much worse than our competitors. We have to close that gap. So we will put research and innovation, science and technology at the heart of our economy. We will invest more and focus better. And we will ensure that our small companies, our start-ups and scale-ups, can thrive here in Europe. We know what needs to be done. A start-up from California can expand and raise money all across the United States. But a start-up in Europe has to deal with 27 different national barriers. We need to make it easier to grow in Europe. For this and many more reasons the first-ever Commissioner for Start-Ups, Research and Innovation will be Ekaterina Zaharieva. Her leadership and experience will be invaluable to get more breakthrough tech from the lab to the market.

This is particularly important when it comes to digital tech. For us to be competitive, Europe must be home to the next wave of frontier technologies. And I can think of no better person to lead on this as Executive Vice-President than Henna Virkkunen. You know her well. She will leave no stone unturned to ensure Europe can use digital technologies to boost its prosperity, to unleash innovation and to help keep people safer. And she is the right person to ensure that Europe's tech sovereignty is built right here in Europe.

Honourable Members,

The second pillar is the joint plan for decarbonisation and competitiveness. Almost five years ago we launched the European Green Deal – our growth strategy and roadmap to net zero. The reasons which pushed us to be so ambitious then are even more pronounced today. So I want to be clear: We must and will stay the course on the goals of the European Green Deal. But if we want to be successful in this transition, we must be more agile and better accompany people and business along the way. And we need to play to our traditional strengths – our industries and SMEs, our innovators and our workers. This is why we will put forward the Clean Industrial Deal within the first 100 days of the mandate. This will involve the entire College. And, we will have a team working hand in hand to coordinate our proposal.

We will have Teresa Ribera Rodríguez, our first Executive Vice-President for a Clean, Just and Competitive Transition. She is well equipped to ensure that we have a modern competition policy to support our ambitions. She is a true and devoted European. And together, we will always work for the European interest. We will have Stéphane Séjourné. You all know him very well here in this Parliament. He will work tirelessly as Executive Vice-President to bring the industry and internal market dimensions together. And we will have Wopke Hoekstra. Wopke was our key negotiator at COP29. And he is already leading the road to net-zero and clean growth. Together, they will ensure that we tackle the biggest challenges facing our companies. And we know that the most prominent of these is high energy prices. We have done a lot to respond to Russia's energy blackmail and the high inflation that followed. But the price of energy has to go down further. And this is what Dan Jørgensen will be working on, building on his previous experience. To bring down costs for households and companies. To invest in clean energy. And to replace Russian LNG imports. It is high time to make that happen. And I know this House will support us in this.

Honourable Members,

Each industry has different needs. And each sector will have its own individual path to be clean and competitive. This is why I am delighted that to help make that happen Apostolos Tzitzikostas will be in charge of transport and tourism. His vast experience of European regions will be invaluable to develop connectivity. To support this work, I have decided to convene a Strategic Dialogue on the Future of the Car Industry in Europe. The dialogue and its follow-up will be under my leadership. We will bring together all stakeholders around the table. To listen to each other. And to design solutions together as this industry goes through a deep and disruptive transition. Europe's car industry is a European pride. Millions of jobs depend on it. And together we have to make sure that the future of cars will continue to be made in Europe.

Honourable Members,

The third and last pillar is reinforcing our economic security. We know that overdependencies can quickly turn into vulnerabilities. This is why stable and secure supply chains are so vital. Critical raw materials are the most obvious example. The demand for critical minerals for the clean transition has already doubled during the last mandate, and it could triple by the end of the next one. So we need free and fair trade to diversify our suppliers. There is no one better suited to do this than Maroš Šefčovič. He will deliver more partnerships – for trade and investments – and also to protect our economic security against the greatest risks to our strategic interests and sovereignty. And we must go further.

President Niinistö's report on preparedness called for a systematic review of all our dependencies. To increase our resilience, he has laid out a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. This is why I have asked Hadja Lahbib to work on crisis response and preparedness. Her work will be supported by HERA. Olivér Várhelyi will lead our work on

biotechnologies and his first priority will be the Critical Medicines Act. And Jessika Roswall will work on developing a competitive circular economy. This is crucial to give us more independence. We have paid the price for putting our future in the hands of a single supplier. And we will not make the same mistake again. European sovereignty is not for sale.

Honourable Members,

War, conflict and human suffering continue unabated in our neighbourhood – from Ukraine to the Middle East and in parts of Africa. Europe must play a stronger role in all of these arenas. We have a duty to help destruction and loss come to an end. Strengthening our security is all the more important in a world as contested and fragile as it is today. A world in which I believe Europe is needed more than ever. Multilateralism and partnerships. Sustainable development and humanitarian aid. Security and human rights. They are more important than ever. And they will continue to be the linchpin of our external action. This will need a lot of work and tireless leadership. I know, we can count on Kaja Kallas as our High Representative and Vice-President. She is the right person at the right time for Europe's diplomacy and interests in the world.

To work on sustainable development, international partnerships and investments through Global Gateway, I have chosen Jozef Síkela. He will bring his business-like mentality and experience to the table to develop the truly strategic approach we need. And we will need a special focus on the regions with which we are bound to by history and geography – starting with our Southern Neighbourhood. I am delighted that Dubravka Šuica will be our first ever Commissioner for the Mediterranean. We share the same shores, the same challenges and the same opportunities. And we know that we share the same destiny.

Honourable Members,

These partnerships will gain importance in today's ever more dangerous world. War is raging on Europe's borders. And we must be ready for what lies ahead – working hand-in-hand with NATO. We know that we have to do a lot more together as Europeans. Just one figure. Russia is spending up to 9% of its GDP on defence. Europe is spending on average 1.9%. There is something wrong in this equation. Our defence spending must increase. We need a single market for defence. We need to strengthen the defence industrial base. We need to improve our military mobility. And we need common European projects on defence. And this is why Andrius Kubilius will be the first European Commissioner for Defence. We have no time to waste. And we must be as ambitious as the threats are serious. So we will come forward with a White Paper on the Future of European Defence in the first 100 days. I can assure you that Europe's security will always be this Commission's priority.

Honourable Members,

This fight for freedom does not just apply to our 27 Member States. The dream of Europe extends to the Western Balkans, to Ukraine, to Moldova and beyond. We have seen the

bravery of the people of Ukraine in pursuing their European journey. We have seen the resilience of the people of Moldova to stick to their European future. We have seen the commitment of the Western Balkans to reform, grow and get ready to join our Union. At the same time, we have seen how Russia will stop at nothing to prevent them having a European future. But honourable Members, Europe's commitment to these countries will always be stronger. Let there be no doubt, we want Ukraine as part of the European Union. So, we will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes. We will get ready with the reforms that we need on our side. And we will support these countries every step of the way on their merits-based process until they are ready to join our Union. Marta Kos – with her vast experience – is the right person for this job. The vision of a continent united by democracy, the rule of law and respect of fundamental freedoms will always drive our work. Because the people of these countries deserve a future of peace, progress and prosperity. And we will make sure that that future can be in Europe.

Honourable Members,

These are the three pillars of our Competitiveness Compass: innovation, decarbonisation and security. They will all require a new approach to coordinating our policies. And they will all need a major boost of investment, simplification and skills. Firstly, on the question of financing. This will have to be an investment Commission. Of course, public investment will be crucial. We have all seen what the budget can deliver for Europeans – whether for our citizens or businesses, our researchers or our farmers, our communities or our regions. But our budget is often too complex – funding the same thing in different programmes and in different ways. We must be much more focused on investing in our priorities. This is why I have put Piotr Serafin in charge of shaping our next MFF. He is a skilled negotiator. He will work with the Parliament and the Council, to deliver a simpler, more focused and more responsive budget. And he will work to ensure that Europe has the means to deliver on its ambitions.

But public budgets can only go so far. We urgently need more private investment. Business expenditure for research and development in Europe accounts for about 1.3% of GDP. That is compared to 1.9% in China and 2.4% in the US. This private capital gap is the main reason we lag behind on overall R&D spending, and thus on innovation. This is why we have proposed a European Savings and Investments Union – a task I have entrusted to Maria Luís Albuquerque. She will help ensure that European companies can find the capital they need here in Europe. With her experience, I know Maria is the right person for the job.

Honourable Members,

For Europe to catch up, we will also need to make things easier for our companies. They are telling us that the regulatory burden weighs heavily on them. Too much reporting. Too many overlaps. And too complex and costly to comply with. We need to streamline our rules to reduce the burden on businesses. And we need to give legal certainty about what we expect

from them. And this is why I have asked one of our most experienced Commissioners, Valdis Dombrovskis, to take the lead on simplification and implementation. He will also be responsible for boosting Europe's economy and productivity. I can announce that one of our first steps in the new mandate will be a new omnibus legislation. We will look at different sectors and assess the European legislation. Our Single Market has always been the greatest engine for growth. This was the message delivered by Enrico Letta in his report. And the greatest strength of the Single Market is that it replaces the myriad national standards and customs, with a single set of rules. So we need to get back to what the Single Market does best. And make business easy across Europe.

Honourable Members,

The foundation of our economy is people. Their hard work, their talent and skills. Competitiveness today is less about the cost of labour, and more about the knowledge of workers. And this is where we can outmatch our competitors. Here in Europe, companies can find incredibly experienced workers and top-notch tech graduates. But we do not have enough of them. And this is a handbrake on our ability to compete. For this reason, I have appointed as Executive Vice-President, to lead our work on skills and preparedness Roxana Mînzatu. She will ensure that we put people first. Because productivity depends on good working conditions. On earning a fair wage. On a good work-life balance. On finding a nursery for your kids, and good care for your elderly parents. And on having access to decent and affordable homes.

Housing was one of the biggest issues for Europeans at the last election. It comes up time and again as the biggest concern for so many families. We need to tackle the housing crisis head on. This is why for the first time we will have a Commissioner for Housing. And I am pleased that this Commissioner will be Dan Jørgensen. This idea of putting people first has always been the core of Europe's social market economy. We want strong social partners. The market can only work well, if the social dialogue thrives too. We need to make sure that we strengthen social rights in Europe. Roxana will lead on the ambitious social programme that we have laid out – starting by updating the European Pillar of Social Rights. I know how important this is for you here in this House. So I want to say that I have heard your call. And I am happy to announce that social rights and quality jobs will be part of Roxana's title as EVP.

Honourable Members,

This is how we will uphold the unique quality of life of Europeans – across Europe. Whether in a coastal or fishing community, in a rural area or farming community, on an island or in an outermost region, in a city or in one of Europe's unique and diverse regions. We must work to tackle the issues that regions face – from changing demographics, to climate change or the need for modern infrastructure. And this goes to the heart of the freedom, I am talking about today. Because for many people, freedom is about choosing where to live, work and study. Choosing whether to bring up their families in another part of Europe or where they grew up.

As Letta put it: “the freedom to stay”. I want regions and communities to be in control of their own destiny – and to help shape our policies. This is the task of cohesion and reforms that I have entrusted as Executive Vice-President to Raffaele Fitto. This is a choice that I have made. Also because I know how vital it is to give regions the political importance they deserve.

And this is notably the case in our rural and coastal communities. Farmers and fishers give us the highest-quality food in the world. They bear the brunt of climate change more than anybody. And they deserve a level playing field and their hard work to be rewarded. We must ensure that our farmers and fishers have a fair and sufficient income. That they have the right incentives to help protect our nature. This is why I have chosen Christophe Hansen as Commissioner for Agriculture and Food. He will bring the same skills to find compromises as he always did in this House. And he will lead the follow-up of the Strategic Dialogue for the Future of Agriculture in Europe. And I choose Costas Kadis as Commissioner for Fisheries and Oceans. His academic and professional expertise will help to deliver the right solutions. Both Christophe and Costas will ensure that our farming and fishing communities can thrive. Just as they have for generations gone by. Europe will always be at their side, and so will this Commission.

Honourable Members,

Since the start of my first mandate, I promised an approach to migration that is both fair and firm. That guarantees sovereignty and solidarity. With stricter rules but also stronger guarantees for individual rights. And we will work on opening up legal pathways. This approach is now at the core of the Pact on Migration and Asylum. And Magnus Brunner is the right person to preserve this balance. And he will work every single day to secure our external borders and bolster our internal security.

Honourable Members,

The rights and freedoms we enjoy were gained slowly, generation after generation. We owe them to freedom fighters who stood on a barricade, and trade unionists on a picket line. To women who raised their voice, and reformers who patiently lobbied for change. To mass mobilisations, and to lonely campaigners with the courage to challenge the status quo. It has taken decades to earn the freedoms we hold today. But it can take a moment to lose them from our grasp. This is why we must always be vigilant. And I have tasked Michael McGrath to be a steadfast guardian of our values and principles. And I have listened to the European Parliament and added consumer protection to his title. He will consolidate the tools for the rule of law we already have. And he will work to build new ones, including proposals on smart conditionality. And he will make sure that the rule of law – and justice for all – remains at the heart of our European project. And he will strengthen equal application of all rule of law instruments. Our values are our foundation and our common bond, and they will always be our future.

Honourable Members,

This College is the right team for this moment in Europe's history. I want to stress that word ‘team'. We will be a team with European citizens – listening and learning more from the daily realities people face. And we will also be a team with you and with the Member States. We know that your confidence will need to be continuously earnt. Not just for today's vote but for the whole five years. This is why I have asked Commissioners to be more present in this plenary and in each of your committees to engage more and be more transparent. And we will work to keep strengthening our partnership with this House – starting with the reform of our Framework Agreement. You can count on me – and on Maroš Šefčovič and all Commissioners to deliver on that from day one. Together, we can work on the ambitious reform agenda Europe needs. I believe we need Treaty change, where it can improve our Union. And I want to work on that with this House.

And this team that you are voting on today is truly European. It represents different nations and generations. We have former Prime Ministers and Ministers, mayors and local officials. Some have been CEOs and others have worked for non-profits. Some have been journalists and business owners. Others are biologists or physicists by training. Some are from rural areas and farming stock and others from the bright lights of our big cities. Some have lived through wars, others through the transition to democracy. I am proud that this team is so diverse in many ways. But we all know there is more work to do. As I promised you in July, I fought tooth and nail just to ensure we got to 11 women in this College. Up from 5 when the first set of nominations came in. And yet it is still not even half – and it is certainly not enough. And we have achieved so much. We have tackled the gender pay gap. We have taken European action on violence against women. We did what people said was impossible by unblocking women on boards. I want to thank all of you – women and men – in this House for the cross-party support. We will never stop fighting for equality. This is why I am so glad to have Hadja Lahbib as Commissioner for Equality. She has broken so many glass ceilings herself. She will strengthen women's rights and ensure equality for all. Together, we will work every day to bring different parts of our society together. And I have chosen Glenn Micallef – born in the year the Berlin Wall fell – to be the bridge between generations. He will support our young people and ensure solidarity between people of all ages.

Honourable Members,

Freedom and democracy need to be nourished and fought for every single day, so we can pass them on to the next generation. Just as we inherited them from those before us. Last week, Strasbourg marked a momentous anniversary. 80 years since the day Strasbourg was liberated – 23 November 1944. After five years of Nazi annexation, Strasbourg was finally free. It was a fresh start for the city and hope for Europe. But what followed was not easy. Europeans had fought each other for so long. It took a generation of leaders with the courage to mend the wounds, to imagine a different future. This is the spirit that has led our continent forward ever since. Time and again, we have had a choice. On the one hand, a course of division and

decline. On the other, the narrow path towards a more united Europe. Europe has always chosen strength in unity. So it is with honour and deep emotion that I stand here in Strasbourg 80 years on. In this House of European democracy. At the heart of a free Europe. Asking you for your trust in this team. Asking you to choose a stronger and more united future. Asking you to choose a future of freedom for Europe. That path has never been the easiest one. But together, we know we can do it.

So let us get to work.

Es lebe Europa, vive l'Europe, long live Europe.